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Signoffs

- ___ Ryan
- ___ Story Editor
- ___ Chris
- ___ Sean
- ___ Hannah
- ___ Amy
- ___ Phyllis (ads)

>first look

The Next Picture Show

How a bunch of unknown snowboard filmmakers created the most innovative and respected action-sports empire

BY JOSH DEAN

IN THE SECOND WEEK of February, a three-minute teaser for a film called *The Art of Flight* was posted online. Shot by the Jackson, Wyoming-based production house Brain Farm and starring Travis Rice, widely regarded as the world's best snowboarder, the clip blew up—in part due to the formidable marketing tentacles of Red Bull, the film's primary backer. Within a week, it had been viewed 1.5 million times, approximately 1.3 million more than any other snowboarding film's trailer. "Justin Timberlake texted me," the movie's 29-year-old director, Curt Morgan, told me shortly after the clip went viral. "50 Cent posted it."

Hold that thought: 50 Cent posted a link to a trailer for a snowboarding film?

Certainly, the clip for *Flight*, which debuts this September 7th in New York City's Beacon Theater, had reached a much broader audience than any snowboarding film had before, but it was also wowing action-sports luminaries. "Mind-blowing," said Annie Fast, the editor in chief of *Transworld Snowboarding*. "Insanely beautiful and well crafted," said Brian Wimmer, director and founder of the X-Dance Action Sports Film Festival.

While the snowboarding feats themselves are often astonishing, it's the trailer's cinematography that's most affecting. Thanks to a deep-pocketed investor and a tight relationship with Red Bull, which is picking up the entire film's undisclosed (but certainly multimillion-dollar) tab, Morgan is able to deploy the same arsenal of high-tech toys used by the crews of Discovery Channel hits *Planet Earth* and *Life*, including a Cineflex—a remote-controlled gyro-stabilized camera that



Travis Rice
and the Brain
Farm crew
filming in the
Snake River
Mountains,
Wyoming



Clockwise from left: Travis Rice, as seen by the Phantom HD Gold camera; the Cineflex camera attached to a Ranger Quad (right) and a chairlift at Jackson Mountain Resort



FIRST LOOK



“We have a lot of money in hardware,” Morgan says about their incredible arsenal of gear. How much? “I’m not sure I want to put a figure on it.” He thinks about it for a minute: “You can say millions.”

utilizes software developed for the military. One of many beautiful shots in the trailer is of professional snowboarder Mark Landvik launching from a massive kicker and hand-planting off a pine tree that looks to be the height of a small skyscraper. If the sequence had been shot like every other action-sports film—that is, by a single camera guy, or maybe two, or perhaps from a helicopter, using standard-issue high-definition cameras—it would have been extraordinarily cool. But because Morgan was able to set up a 12-foot jib for one of his newest gizmos, the super-slow-motion Phantom HD Gold (which is capable of turning one second into 60), it’s extraordinarily cool and also serenely graceful.

What isn’t apparent, of course, is all the painstaking preparation that went into it. To set up the shot, which was filmed 20 miles from the nearest trailhead in the Snake River Mountains outside Jackson this past January, it took six guys on sleds three days to break trail for the camera crew, then another full day to shuttle in the 800 pounds of equipment, including 200 pounds of free weights used as ballast for the Phantom’s jib arm. Once every-

thing was in place, a rotating team of 10 to 12 guys—including Rice, Landvik, and Olympic halfpipe bronze medalist Scotty Lago—spent four more days moving an estimated 80 tons of snow to build the 20-foot kicker Landvik and company would launch off.

“In the commercial world,” Morgan told me a few days after I watched his crew methodically build the kicker, “that one jump would cost a half-million dollars.” For Morgan, it was just another day on location for *Flight*, which as of early July was still in post-production. Over the past two years, when not directing commercials for blue-chip clients like Visa and shooting scenes for Hollywood films like *Jackass 3D*, Morgan and crew have been following Rice, Landvik, and a revolving cast of snowboarding’s cool kids around the planet.

Already, they’d spent a month and a half in Chile and a month in Alaska’s Tordrillo Mountains, plus stints in Canada and Jackson, with tentative plans to hit British Columbia, Romania, Greece, Austria, and, if they still had the cash, Greenland. Snowmobiles had been crashed, 15 top-of-the-line AStar B3 helicopters rented, and both fire-works and firearms (Morgan tends to carry a

.50-caliber pistol on shoots) deployed.

You’ll be able to see it all, though not necessarily in the movie. A prerequisite of Red Bull’s investment was that Brain Farm also shoot an accompanying TV show, an eight-episode making-of documentary. (At press time, Brain Farm’s agents were still in negotiations with networks; the series is expected to debut in early 2012.)

All signs point to *Flight* becoming the biggest action-sports movie of all time, bypassing its groundbreaking precursor, *That’s It, That’s All*, the 2009 film that established Brain Farm as arguably the most innovative company in the business.

IT’S WORTH NOTING THAT raising the bar in this genre wasn’t terribly difficult. For the most part, all ski movies these days look basically alike. A big reason is there simply isn’t much money to be made from them.

From left: Cameraman Gabe Langlois, Travis Rice, Mark Landvik, Curt Morgan, producer Chad Jackson, and cameraman Stephen Scherba



FIRST LOOK



Brain Farm co-founder Curt Morgan

bad boys of snowboarding who would go on to found Grenade Gloves. A few years spent making low-budget films burned Morgan out, and in 2002 he moved back to his hometown of Albany, New York, where he spent a year unloading trucks and playing in a metal band. His old friend Rice, who was by now pulling in big sponsorship dollars, most notably from Red Bull and Quiksilver, intervened. “Travis called me and said, ‘We need to start making movies. I can pay you now. I’ve got money!’”

Snow-porn filmmakers generally scrape by, squeezing money from increasingly cash-strapped endemic sponsors and negotiating reduced rates from resorts and heli- or cat-ski operations in exchange for exposure. Following the business model established by Warren Miller, the down payment for the next film came from the previous film’s DVD sales and tour revenue. “Most ski filmmakers are geniuses at doing a lot with a little bit of budget,” says Jack Shaw, a journalist and ski guide who’s written about the history of the genre.

Relatively small budgets, typically in the mid-six figures for feature-length docs made by outfits like Teton Gravity Research and Mack Dawg Productions, naturally limit production values. There have been attempts to break the mold, notably 2005’s *First Descent*, which was paid for by Mountain Dew, and 2007’s *Steep*, an extreme-skiing documentary that received a wide theatrical release. Neither succeeded. The former was boring and repetitive and panned by the film’s core audience as well as mainstream viewers; the latter was good but ultimately not entertaining enough to interest the general public.

Flight is a different animal entirely. From Brain Farm’s inception in 2008, the company has played the game with a vastly different set of rules and tools. Rice and Morgan have been friends since they were both 17-year-olds riding for Rossignol. While Rice’s star in the sport ascended, Morgan abandoned

his career after breaking his back three times in one year. He’d always loved photography and film, though, and after attending some film workshops at Maine Media College, he began making films with the Kass brothers, Matt and Danny, the New Jersey-reared

The Toy Chest

A closer look at some of Brain Farm’s highest-tech tools

1. PHANTOM HD GOLD CAMERA

The \$70,000 Phantom Gold can shoot more than 1,000 high-definition frames per second (fps), which means one second of Phantom footage can be drawn out to about half a minute—enough to parse the beat of a hummingbird’s wings.

2. CINEFLEX V14 HD SYSTEM

The Cineflex utilizes a custom remote-controlled Sony CineAlta HDC 1500, the same system used to shoot the Super Bowl. But because it’s surrounded by five stabilizing gyros, the \$500,000 system can capture rock-solid footage even when being buffeted by 90-mph winds.

3. RED ONE HD CAMERA

The \$35,000 Red One

shoots 30 fps at 4,500 pixels—nearly four times the resolution of standard HD cameras. Plus, it gives editors the same freedom in postproduction—adjustable frame rates, color temperatures, and apertures—that the digital revolution gave still photographers years ago.

4. ASTAR B3 HELICOPTER

Brain Farm rented more than a dozen of these birds while shooting for *Flight*. The B3’s roomy 28-square-foot cabin can hold five snowboarders and a cameraman. Its massive engine is specifically designed to perform well in extreme temperatures and high altitudes, and it’s the only type of helicopter that’s landed on Everest’s summit.

—KYLE DICKMAN





FIRST LOOK

Morgan moved into Rice's house in Jackson, where Rice was born and raised, and they began work on their first project, 2006's *The Community Project*. The following year, Morgan and Rice were traveling in New Zealand when they met a film crew that was shooting from helicopters using a revolutionary new camera-stabilization system. The footage blew their minds. A few months later, the two headed back to New Zealand, rented the crew's equipment, and started filming *That's It, That's All*.

TITA's stunning visuals, especially those zoom-out-for-miles shots much of the world first saw in *Planet Earth*, started attracting notice from non-action-sports clients, but it was an introduction to Joe Sorge, a wealthy biotech entrepreneur who owns a home in



Brain Farm cameraman Gabe Langlois

The Cineflex camera was developed by the defense industry for spying. Its use is still controlled by International Traffic in Arms Regulations, which requires that Brain Farm register it with the State Department.

Jackson, that allowed Morgan to build Brain Farm into the Willy Wonka production house it is today. In 2009, over dinner in Los Angeles, Morgan told Sorge about his fantasy of buying an arsenal of cutting-edge production equipment, including his own Cineflex. Sorge agreed to bankroll an incredible lineup of gear—including the Phantom, the Cineflex, and an array of HD and 35mm film cameras (see “The Toy Chest,” page 5)—in exchange for a portion of the company.

“We have a lot of money in hardware,” Morgan says. How much? “I’m not sure I want to put a figure on it.” He thinks about it for a minute: “You can say millions.”

Brain Farm now has eight full-time employees and a slick headquarters in a modern loftlike building just outside Jackson. Over the past 18 months, in addition to their projects with Visa and *Jackass 3D*, Brain Farm worked on an episode of *Expedition Wild*, a series on the National Geographic Channel; filmed commercials for Subaru, NBC/Universal, and Quiksilver; and, most recently, shot a two-minute 3-D spot for Red Bull starring the deaf motocross rider Ashley Fiolek, which aired in theaters before *Thor* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*.

ONE EVENING WHILE I was in Jackson, Morgan offered to take me for a ride in what he

calls the Cinema Truck, a Ford F-250 pickup modified to be a rolling platform for the Cineflex. The truck looks menacing—it’s blacked out from top to tire and mounted with what looks like a large surveillance cam on the roof.

In a sense, that’s what the Cineflex is: a five-axis, extremely long-distance high-definition camera system developed by the defense industry for spying. Its use is still controlled by International Traffic in Arms Regulations, which requires that Brain Farm register it with the State Department.

As Brain Farm marketing chief Chad Jackson steers the truck out onto the road, the camera’s images show up in hi-def on a large screen built into the dash. Morgan twiddles a knob on a remote-control console and the camera spins around to focus on a Subaru trailing us. He zooms in, in, in, until I can just about see the nose hairs of the woman driving. Spinning the camera 180 degrees, he points out a speck in my vision thousands of yards away that turns out to be a bush, and behind it is a mule deer, as crisp as if it were standing on the hood. It’s unbelievable.

“I consider this an endless dolly,” Morgan says. He estimates that he uses it in approximately 60 percent of Brain Farm’s shots, and though it was initially built to be affixed to helicopters, Morgan has designed custom mounts for a snowmobile, an ATV, a snow-

cat, and, most recently, a chairlift.

The plan had been for me to tag along as Brain Farm experimented with the new chairlift mount, shooting Rice and Landvik in-bounds at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort, but there wasn’t enough new snow. Instead, Morgan and his crew had opted to set up shop at one of their favorite filming locations in the Snake River Mountains.

For the day’s first major shot, the group had selected a gap between some trees at the top of a small canyon. Morgan set up by himself, with the Phantom, to one side. First to go was Landvik, who soared out of the woods and over the edge. He tapped a tree in the air, stomped the landing, and rode down to meet the rest of the crew, which included one guy shooting a traditional long-lens 35mm camera and another shooting with a VariCam for the TV show.

“That was sick,” Morgan rasped over the radio when Landvik slid to a stop below. “Maybe you can double-tap this time?”

Landvik laughed. “He’s so unrealistic,” he said, his speech slurred by a fat lip and 13 stitches he’d gotten in a recent crash.

One criticism you’ll sometimes hear of Morgan—who wants every frame to be epic—is that he pushes riders too hard, goading them into tricks they might not otherwise attempt.

This was not an issue for Lago. His jump, which began with a higher, angled approach, was absolutely huge, and he, too, tapped the tree—only he didn’t mean to. The glancing blow spun him off-axis, and he found himself 30 feet in the air falling backward, his arms spinning wildly as he tried in vain to stay upright. He crashed in an enormous puff of white. When he arrived at the bot-



FIRST LOOK



Professional snowboarders Scotty Lago and Travis Rice

tom, snow was packed into every opening of his helmet.

"That's gonna look epic on the Phantom," Landvik said. "Your arms will spin like 50 times."

"I wanna yell the worst word right now," Lago said, chucking his helmet. "Let's go build a big fucking jump!"

I SKIPPED THE NEXT DAY'S shoot, but later that evening I visited Morgan at Brain Farm's editing suite to see how the day's filming had gone. "It got gnarly out there," he said as he queued up the clip he'd been working on. Already, he'd laid a moody audio track under the action. (Morgan is also helping produce *Flight's* soundtrack, and he'd recently spent a week collaborating with the French musician Anthony Gonzalez, who records under the name M83.) Slowly—very, very slowly—Scotty Lago's image appeared in the frame, and he executed an impressive-looking trick I didn't recognize.

"These are some of the biggest airs ever," Morgan said, noting that what Lago had done was a switch double rodeo 10. Unfortunately, that wasn't the gnarly part. Upon impact, Lago kneed himself in the face—hard. "Scotty broke his jaw, and now it's wired shut," Morgan said. "We spent most of the night at the hospital." And of course: "We got it all on film."

While Morgan was initially daunted by *Flight's* TV component, he's since grown to enjoy the medium. Making ambitious films is unbelievably complicated—and stressful—but he found that making TV required no thought at all. Everything that's bad for the movie—injuries, fights, logistical snafus—is great for TV.

"Now I almost love TV more than film,"

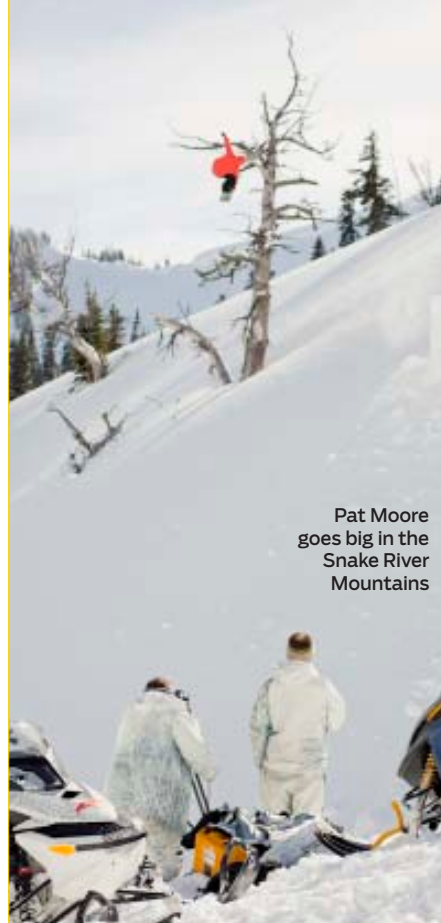
he said, adding that with film "it can take a week to get one shot. That's stupid. But all the things around that is what's actually interesting to everyone else." That said, Brain Farm is still devoting most of its promotional effort to the film. After *Flight's* world premiere this September in New York, it will tour the U.S., playing in a mix of bigger cities and ski towns before heading to Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

Exploiting every possible point of revenue, Brain Farm will simultaneously release the film through the iTunes Store and as a DVD/Blu-ray Disc set, and it will sell a limited-edition coffee-table book, *The Art of Light*, featuring stills and shots by the rotating cast of set photographers. This past May, Morgan and Gonzalez—under the name the Three Corners of the Earth—also released a set of songs from their recording sessions on iTunes, including the one that appears in the trailer.

In the end, though, Morgan is worried less about the box office than about the film's critical reception. While he declined to discuss Brain Farm's financials with me, I got the distinct impression that their commercial and Hollywood work now brings in the majority of their revenue, and that Morgan views *TITA* and *Flight* as gigantic calling cards he's using to build his celebrity. If there's been one major criticism of *TITA*, it's that, for all its dazzling visuals, it's still just snow porn. There isn't much story.

"One of the toughest things is to please the core—someone who lives and breathes it—while doing something that speaks to the layman," says Travis Rice.

When I reached Morgan on the phone a few weeks later, he was still tinkering with how



Pat Moore goes big in the Snake River Mountains

much "character component," as he referred to it, there would be in *Flight's* final cut. He knows that every wide-angle shot of an epic jump he edits out will alienate the park rats, while every additional minute of character and story will make it more interesting to mainstream viewers.

In the meantime, snow just kept falling on Wyoming. So much, in fact, that Brain Farm ended up delaying its departure for Revelstoke, and after that Alaska, to finish the Jackson chapter of the film. They'd scratched Romania, Greece, and Austria from the plan, and Greenland was looking unlikely. While Morgan told me he could probably assemble the movie then if he had to, he still wasn't sure about the film's length. When I'd visited him in Jackson, he was leaning toward a feature. Now he wasn't so sure. Not that any of these issues were keeping him up at night. In part that's because he's so busy. He was just back from shooting the 3-D Red Bull commercial, as well as a series of ads for the Marines. Or it might be because he's already begun chewing over his next big projects—including, perhaps, a surf film, a snowboarding movie "based around Antarctica," and something shot entirely in 3-D. Or it might simply be that Brain Farm is now successful enough that he doesn't have to do everything. "I used to have 40 jobs," Morgan says. Now he can orchestrate a shoot and not actually have to be there: "It's dumping out, it's freezing, and I'm eating a hamburger at a deli." ○